Novel: A Forum on Fiction (Duke University Press)

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Duke University Press in *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, published 1 May 2025 and available at:

https://read.dukeupress.edu/novel/article-abstract/58/1/19/400746/When-We-Were-Humans-Kazuo-Ishiguro-s-Never-Let-Me?redirectedFrom=fulltext

and:

https://doi.org/10.1215/00295132-11679271

Peter Sloane, 'When We Were Humans: Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and Aloning', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction,* 58.1 (2025): 19–35.

When We Were Humans

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* and *A*loning

Human cloning, or even animal cloning, is a notoriously complex business, often involving imagined but conceivably possible near future technologies. Aldous Huxley devotes the opening passages of his utopian vision, *Brave New World* (1932), to providing an insight into the science-fictional advancements that enable genetic replication, as we join a group of eager visitors on a tour of the impressive 'hatcheries' to observe first hand

> The technique for preserving the excised ovary alive and actively developing; passed on to a consideration of optimum temperature, salinity, viscosity; referred to the liquor in which the detached and ripened eggs were kept […] how the fertilized ova went back to the incubators; where the Alphas and Betas remained until definitely bottled; while the Gammas, Deltas and Epsilons were brought out again, after only thirty-six hours, to undergo Bokanovsky's Process. (4)

The Bokanovsky process, which facilitates the mechanical production of 96 genotypically identical beings from one egg, is then described in convincing detail.[1] Huxley, like many intellectuals confronted with a rapidly expanding (urban poor) population, was concerned with 'social degeneration' arising, as he wrote in 1927, because 'physically and mentally defective individuals are now preserved in greater quantities than at any other period' ("A Note", np). For Huxley, as Joanne Woiak has suggested, 'eugenics was not a nightmare prospect but rather the best hope for designing a better world if used in the right ways by the right people' (107). His visionary fiction evidences a sophisticated scientific awareness for 1932, inspired by the inauguration of the Eugenics Education Society in 1907 and the American Eugenics Society in 1921.

[1] If you are in any doubt that Huxley's is a vision not of dystopia but utopia, consult David Bradshaw's *The Hidden Huxley* (1995).

In Michael Crichton's *Jurassic Park* (1990), the science is more contemporary, informed by real world advancements such as the first nuclear transfer from an embryonic cell in 1987. All is on display as we enjoy another lengthy tour of a working lab:

> Now we are finding a fragment of DNA that overlaps the injury area, and will tell us what is missing. And you can see we can find it, and go ahead and make the repair. The dark bars you see are restriction fragments—small sections of dinosaur DNA, broken by enzymes and then analyzed. The computer is now recombining them, by searching for overlapping sections of code. It's a little bit like putting a puzzle together. The computer can do it very rapidly [to produce a] revised DNA strand, repaired by the computer. The operation you've witnessed would have taken months in a conventional lab, but we can do it in seconds (114).

Again, impressive science being 'witnessed', not in a 'conventional lab', which reminds us that we are in bright futures of new tech and all the exciting innovative possibilities which it enables. Even in the first decades of the 21st century, as Francisco J. Ayala notes, the 'obstacles and drawbacks' to human cloning 'are many and insuperable, at least at the present state of knowledge', yet it makes perfect sense with these expositions of techniques extrapolated from the real science of their respective periods that cloning is a possibility (8883). It is, in other words, entirely credible in these imaginary spaces that all the people whom we encounter are clones and that dinosaurs once again roam the earth.

Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) is perhaps the most moving and well known of contemporary clone fictions, partly because of the (decidedly less delicate) Mark Romanek film based on Alex Garland's screenplay.[2] In an intriguing analysis of the novel's engagement with contemporaneous science (disputing M. John Harrison's claims that it contained 'no science') Gabriele Griffin remarks that it appeared 'when cloning, and biotechnological developments and debates associated with these more generally, were high

[2] Garland and Ishiguro, close friends, were neighbours while Ishiguro was working on the novel and talked often about it. They met, as Ishiguro recalls, in 1998, after 'the publication of his backpacking classic, *The Beach'* (Blackburn). Ishiguro wrote the introduction to Faber's script of the film.

on the public agenda' (646). We all remember fondly, perhaps with a lingering unease, Dolly the sheep. Unlike Huxley or Crichton, who take the time to reassure us about their novels' scientific credibility, in Ishiguro's first work of speculative fiction we and the clones, or 'students' as they are euphemistically known, are 'told and not told' about their nature and their fates. The children, or 'donors', to whom (or is it which) we are introduced by clone and career 'carer' Kathy H., come to realize gradually through Ishiguro's distinctively subtle narrative diffusion, particulate detail carefully filtered through a distorting textual mesh, that they have been 'created' to provide replacement organs for 'real' people. Before middle age, indeed barely at childhood's end, they are transferred to a centre for harvesting until they 'complete' during the fourth (or not, as Tommy imagines to his horror). For Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, in a characteristically brilliant reading, '*Never Let Me Go* comments on eugenic world building', by 'making it seem surreal, disorienting, and thus newly apparent' because it is taken for granted in a world which attempts to eradicate disability (136). Technology remains occluded, 'in the shadows' to borrow a phrase from the Guardian Miss Emily. Will Kanyusik argues insightfully that in the novel biomedical 'power operates covertly rather than overtly, and this covert operation is revealed primarily through the narrative voice of its first-person protagonist' (444). Since the clones have no insight into but are subject to that insidious power, and since Kathy is our sole point of informational access to this familiar yet sinisterly alternative world, we too must take it on good faith that science has evolved to such a degree of precision that clones genetically and behaviourally indistinguishable from actual persons are possible.

A consolatory myth, one of many viral rumours, emerges at the 'elite schools' like the prestigious Hailsham, amongst those students who come gradually to accept their destiny, of compassionate stays of 'completion', 'people having their donations deferred if they're really in love' and can prove that love, just as Axl and Beatrice are asked to provide evidence of

their enduring commitment at the bittersweet end of *The Buried Giant* (2016), when they too seek a rare dispensation (172). In the devastating final chapters of *NLMG,* Kathy, a 'carer' until she herself is inevitably called to donate, and Tommy, who is approaching his fourth extraction, go to see whether their love, late though it is, might secure them such a precious reprieve. Having tracked down their old 'guardians', in one of the novel's most moving passages, they enter and sit with anxious expectation in a dingy room. Kathy recalls in her memoir that she 'was still looking into the darkness when I heard Madame let out a kind of snort, and she came striding past us and on into the dark. Then there were more mechanical sounds, and Madame emerged pushing a figure in a wheelchair' (250). Well, that's odd: not an electric wheelchair; no prosthetic lightweight servo-motor exoskeleton; something hovering on a cushion of soft blue light from some as yet undiscovered energy source, just an old creaky wheelchair being manually pushed across a poorly lit room. A little later, in a moment of comical vagueness, Miss Emily says that the public always viewed the clones simply as 'objects in test tubes' to make organ harvesting palatable. 'Test tubes': the only meaningful reference to the scientific process in the entire novel.

Previously, I have argued that Kathy's memoir, riven with cultured inconsistencies and textured with barely disguised resentment, is both an act of revenge against Ruth for obstructing her relationship with Tommy and also a submission for *our* consideration for her deferral (Sloane 2021; 2023).[3] Here, I hope to justify a more radical reading, or perhaps (if my premise is convincing or at least credible), a more realistic, even common sense reinterpretation which destabilises the novel's already flimsy sci-fi fabric: Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth are not clones at all, but 'clones', ordinary human beings, *real* children, taken by force from or sold by unfit parents and raised by the state. Cloning, which seems unlikely in the novel's technological and economic context, is a powerfully effective myth, devised to ease

[3] *Kazuo Ishiguro's Gestural Poetics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021).

the collective guilt of a nation increasingly reliant on this new ready supply of healthy transplant-ready organs. Griffin notes that '*Never Let Me Go* takes on the perspective of the clones, rather than of their creators, in its presentation of technoscience' so that no 'space is given over to the description of scientific process as such and for that reason "many questions are left unanswered"' (652). Here, however, I argue that this is not merely a function of Ishiguro's idiosyncratically myopic narrative mechanics, but rather that science is so notably absent in the text because it simply does not exist in the fictional world. This is not to reinforce the standard interpretation that the clones are a metaphor for various manifestations of vulnerability, but that they are the dehumanised economic underclass. In this literal reading, the word 'clone' is decoded as the most pervasive, effective, and uninterrogated of the novel's transformative, sterilising euphemisms, like 'donation', 'student', and 'completion'; it means, fundamentally, '*a*lone', unwanted, orphaned, ultimately let go. This shift from a literalist reading goes against scholarly trends of *Never Let Me Go*, which interpret the novel to be about clones, but with wider implications about, for example, caring (Whitehead), or even disability (Garland-Thomson). These readings have proven fruitful, but Ishiguro's style, as I have argued elsewhere, is more gestural, suggestive, and while the re-interpretation proposed here is perhaps radical in its refusal to simply acquiesce to the seductive mythos of cloning, it gives rise to a series of ambiguities and deceptions that are in fact more representative of Ishiguro's evasive narrative style

If we at least humour such a premise, or a counter-narrative to that propagated about unlikely clones, the novel undergoes a fundamental change, because those whose organs are being harvested are not simply *like* us as many (including my own previous) readings have supposed, but *are* us. This is not the first time Ishiguro, profoundly interested in class and exploitation, has broached the issue of organs being harvested from the poor for medical use. One of his first paid commissions was for British TV's Ch4, which had started transmitting in

1982. He wrote three screenplays, including a short film called *The Gourmet* (1984), in which the tellingly named egoistic epicurean Manley Kingston is on a career-capping quest to trap and eat a ghost. His intended feast is the spectre of a pauper, already a victim to violence, having been killed a century before because, as Manley flippantly remarks to his homeless guide, 'some human organs were needed for research purposes' (120). More recently, in *Klara and the Sun* (2021), our eponymous Artificial Intelligence servant is asked to donate a small quantity of 'P.E.G. Nine solution', her equivalent of cerebrospinal fluid, knowing that it might have 'some effects on your cognitive abilities' (227). If a reading that rehumanises the clones by revealing not their human-*like* humanity but their sameness provokes different affective responses to those of a novel that exploits empathy encouraged by a first-person memoir which strives to evidence similarity and not sameness, then that forces us to acknowledge that we do not, despite our liberal posthuman sentiment, consider the clones to be entirely human and might therefore be equally likely, should the need arise, to exploit them. That we consider lab produced entities to be ontologically distinct from us is evident from the lingering questions that arise in our reception of the most resonant clone fictions, like Ridley Scott's *Bladerunner* (1982), which derives much of its enduring power from the ambiguity about whether Deckard is a replicant, as if a definitive answer to such a question would change the nature of the character. But, again, it is credible in Scott's elaborate future world that Deckard may be a replicant because the dazzling science is held up for display (too prominently in *Bladerunner 2049* (2017), which erotises its novum): in *NLMG*, in the absence of such credibility, the question is less clear.

I

It seems incongruous that a fictional world so technologically primitive might have the capacity to achieve a scientific revolution that even today remains both morally and practically unrealisable. In *NLMG* Kathy drives, often alone, around poorly lit back roads in a

run-down combustion engine car. She even complains, very pointedly, that 'the tape machine in my car's got so dodgy' that she cannot even play her favourite cassette, *Songs After Dark,* from which fictional work the eponymous song is taken. The album sustains a deeper symbolic resonance, however. Kathy reminds us that it was 'originally an LP', but that she had a cassette, in fact 'another copy' of one she'd owned and lost (66-67). All books are clones, as are all albums, identical copies of sometimes lost originals often in different mediums but which lose none of the emotive power by virtue of that (unless of course we consider Benjamin's soul-like aura). We have tape cassettes, no hovering vehicles or self-driving cars, no gesture towards the advent of Tim Berners-Lee's WorldWideWeb in 1990, and no mention of even the basics of cloning. An intuitive answer to this conundrum is, as Margaret Atwood has argued, that 'Ishiguro isn't much interested in the practicalities of cloning and organ donation' (quoted in Griffin 2009, 647). In his borrowing of sci-fi, Ishiguro spends little time elucidating what Darko Suvin has famously called the 'novum', a 'cognitive innovation [that] is a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author's and implied reader's norm of reality' (1979, 64). We might think of Star Trek's lightspeed-breaking warp engines, Dr Who's time-warping Tardis, or Battlestar Gallactica's Cylons (who tease the posthuman boundary). For Ishiguro, all of the conceptual heavy lifting is accomplished with great economy by simply asking us to accept, in a work about the transformative power of language, of mythmaking, that the word clone is intended to be literal.

Ishiguro, as playfully unreliable a commentator on his own writing as his characters are their lives, has said that 'I'm not very turned on by futuristic landscapes. Besides, I don't have the energy to think about what cars or shops or cup-holders would look like in a future civilization' (Book Browse). While it is evident that Ishiguro plays with genre (detective, gothic, fantasy, historical) without ever fully submitting to conventional strictures, this seems

an unconvincing, too convenient explanation, more so given his fine attention to the details of butlering, interwar politics, or Japanese imperialism and post war Americanisation which, to his own frustration, led to his becoming 'slightly locked into this realist reader' (Vorda 149). While the world-building of his most overt experiments in genre, *The Buried Giant* and *Klara and the Sun,* is typically thin (James Wood remarks that *BG*'s 'fictional setting is feeble' (np)), there is sufficient scenario specific detail in each to establish the fictional reality of their premises: Gawain exists; there are dragons; Klara and AIs are real; they interact in ethically asymmetrical relations with non-AIs; and genetic manipulation, though imperfect, is present. Shops, cars, and cupholders are trivial, whereas cloning is the novum upon which his work, and the lives of the characters, ostensibly depend.

The environment in which the story unfolds is recognisably late Thatcher Britain, before Blair's New Labour took power in a landslide General Election victory in1997. This period saw an economic downturn which came to be known as 'Breadline Britain' after two national surveys conducted by London Weekend Television in 1983 and 1990. *The Gourmet,* in which Manley mingles with the homeless of London in a soup kitchen as he awaits his ghastly meal, is his most direct critique of Conservative policy in the same period and the growing problem of homelessness. During a time when financial instability culminated in the 1990-1992 recession, future tech for Kathy, as it was for many who remember that period of frequent power cuts (matches and wax candles always within reach) and fuel shortages, is decidedly mundane:

> A lot of the donors' rooms you can't get to with a wheelchair, or else they're too stuffy or too draughty. There aren't nearly enough bathrooms and the ones there are are hard to keep clean, get freezing in winter and are generally too far from the donors' rooms. The Kingsfield, in other words, falls way short of a place like Ruth's centre in Dover, with its gleaming tiles and double-glazed windows that seal at the twist of a handle. (214)

Interestingly, if we think of the unspoken political backdrop of *Remains of the Day* (1989) and the 1956 Suez Crisis, it was the 1973 Yom Kippur War in which Egypt attempted to take control of the same canal that led to a Western energy shortage when OPEC imposed an oil embargo which in turn encouraged the rapid installation of double glazing in Britain. It was not however until the late 1980s and early 1990s, the period in which *NLMG* is set, with the advent of the new technology of PVC, that it became more affordable. Our clones have 'music cassettes', listen to things 'On the radio', watch 'on the television', and not some form of digital screen or holograms. Indeed, there is an extensive passage about students sharing Walkmans which 'had started appearing at Hailsham since the previous year's Sales and by that summer there were at least six of them in circulation', presumably well-worn having been introduced in 1979 (100). We exist in an alternative past in which the single divergence from our own readerly reality is cloning technology. Such powerfully deployed absences are not only common in Ishiguro's writing, but the hallmark of what I have called his gestural poetics. Rushdie reminds us that Ishiguro's first novel, *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), 'was set in post-war Nagasaki but never mentioned the bomb' and '*The Remains of the Day* ignores Suez' although its effects, like the nuclear fallout of Nagasaki, lingers as a subtle presence in the background. However, these events are real-world shared historical points of contact, as opposed to imaginary alternative pasts, and can therefore be assumed to exist for Ono and Stevens as they do for us.

Many critics, including Karl Shaddox, have commented on the fact that 'Though the novel is narrated by a human clone and the major characters are clones, no scientists or doctors appear; there is no theory or explanation of genetic replication and we see nothing of its mechanics and implementation' (449). Remarkably, this lacuna has provoked only taxonomical queries about genre, in much the same way that *When We Were Orphans* (2000) has with detective fiction, or *The Buried Giant* with fantasy. We know that, unlike Michael

Bay's dreadfully entertaining film *The Island* (2005), in which clones are a pre-emptive medical backup for wealthy people, the clones in *NLMG* are 'created' not for a single model but general use, because otherwise multiple organ extraction and therefore completion would be a rarity and not the prognosis for all clones. In this scenario, it is also unlikely that our Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth (as well as all their peers in the cottages) would all have to donate while they are so young; it is entirely plausible that if clones were produced for individuals some might live entire lives without having to donate at all, or even be made aware that they are merely a medical prophylactic (although a healthy 'possible' might explain Kathy's exceptionally long period as a carer). But if the clones, like ours, are not modelled on individuals, it would make more sense to have a standard saleable product, genetically reliable, homogenous, physiologically optimal. They are to a degree anonymous, having no surname but only a letter. Robert Eaglestone has suggested that this trick summons 'up the idea of a "batch" number', implying the existence of Kathy A., B., all the way to H. and beyond (17). But, given that we meet no other Kathys, that we see no two identical clones, it is equally likely that that letter is a final enigmatic but partially erased vestige of home, that it is the abbreviated family name: perhaps it is Kathy Hughes, Kathy Henderson, Kathy Hill, or even Kathy Hailsham.

One counter argument to this reading is the powerful scene when Miss Lucy breaches Hailsham's strict code of secrecy and tells her students directly that 'You'll become adults, then before you're old, before you're even middle-aged, you'll start to donate your vital organs. That's what each of you was created to do' (79-80). Kathy cautions us that this may be misremembered, 'I think that was all she said' she confesses, while Ruth had claimed that 'Miss Lucy had told us a lot more; that she'd explained how before donations we'd all spend some time first as carers, about the usual sequence of the donations, the recovery centres and so on, but I'm pretty sure she didn't', adding suspiciously that there 'were even some *who'd*

actually been there and who thought Miss Lucy had been telling us off for being too rowdy on the veranda' (80). *Actually been there* – has Kathy appropriated a rumour, was she still on the veranda when Miss Lucy spoke? Even if this is recorded with some degree of inaccuracy, Lucy adopts the euphemisms of Hailsham, such as 'donate', as well as the passivity – not 'you'll have your organs forcefully removed', but that 'you'll donate' them. The possibility emerges in this scene that 'created' is just another euphemism, this time for taken from home. In a 2006 article, Ishiguro uses the word to refer to persons, 'What is the purpose for which we've been created', he asks rhetorically, 'and should we try to fulfil it?' Lucy tells them that 'You were brought into *this* world for a purpose', not *the* world, perhaps meaning the world of donations, of Hailsham, interpellated seamlessly into the carefully curated narrative of perfect clones in a world that is otherwise technically underdeveloped and in recession.

Towards the end, in despair as Tommy nears completion, they seek their deferral, assuming as Garland-Thomson suggests that 'If they are exceptionally human, exceptionally normate, their potentiality can be realized. But full human status is not now, nor ever has it ever been, open to them in spite of their normate qualifications' (2017, 139-140). It is only here that we have what we and the students assume is a candid account of the forces governing their lives:

> Very well, sometimes that meant we kept things from you, lied to you. Yes, in many ways we fooled you. I suppose you could even call it that. But we sheltered you during those years, and we gave you your childhoods. Lucy was well-meaning enough. But if she'd had her way, your happiness at Hailsham would have been shattered. Look at you both now! I'm so proud to see you both. You built your lives on what we gave you. You wouldn't be who you are today if we'd not protected you. You wouldn't have become absorbed in your lessons, you wouldn't have lost yourselves in your art and your writing. Why should you have done, knowing what lay in store for each of you? You would have told us it was all pointless, and how could we have argued with you?" (262-263)

Ishiguro frequently questions the value of hiding truths from children. In his disorienting masterpiece, *The Unconsoled* (1995), Ryder takes his adopted son Boris to an old apartment

only to be confronted by a neighbour who reminds Ryder of the terrible arguments that used to happen in the place (simultaneously Ryder's parents and he and Sophie fighting). Ryder asks him, angrily, to stop talking, to which he obstinately replies 'It's not good to over-shelter them. He's got to come to terms with the world', to which Ryder responds with great feeling, recalling his own childhood, that 'Not for a few years yet! He won't, he won't hear such things' (216). Sheltered, that word again. In other words, to know about the reality of life is to lose hope, to succumb to the despair of the fact of mortality; to remain ignorant is to retain at least a tenuous grasp on childhood's temporary innocence. As M. John Harrison wrote, the 'novel isn't about cloning, or being a clone, at all. It's about why we don't explode, why we don't just wake up one day and go sobbing and crying down the street, kicking everything to pieces out of the raw, infuriating, completely personal sense of our lives never having been what they could have been' (2005, np). But even here Miss Emily's question still stands, at this late point: if they were told now, in this room, that they were and always had been human, 'normate', but that that revelation would not save them from their fates, how should they do with such injustice?

Despite the novel's profound unreliability, its foregrounded narrative deceptions, we and our doomed heroes are asked to continue to believe, here, to have faith in the clone myth. If the novel's biomedical power operates overtly, the pervasive power of transformative myth is unavoidable, insidiously seductive. But we have another clue that Madame has given up the ghost, as it were. As Miss Emily goes on that they were 'Shadowy objects in test tubes', she seeks support from Madame, 'Wouldn't you agree, Marie-Claude? She's being very quiet. Usually you can't get her to shut up on this subject' (256). Kanyusik suggests that here 'Miss Emily details the exact nature of the cloning system depicted in the novel', the 'truth about Hailsham'; similarly, Garland-Thomson proposes that the ageing and retired guardians 'still retain the power to narrate the truths' (447-448; 139). Madame is too jaded now to continue

contributing to this palliative narrative, or perhaps too sympathetic. To be told finally that there are no deferrals is one thing, but to be told that you are human, that you were born to parents, that you were taken away or even sold, sterilised and exploited for the benefit of others is an incomparably deeper trauma. In this reading, there are indeed 'possibles' in the world, 'models', not cell donors, but parents, lost mothers and fathers. On the occasion that Madame does speak to Kathy when she asks her about the terrible moment when Madame watches her dancing, clutching a pillow to the eponymous song, Madame tells Kathy that she was sad because 'When I watched you dancing that day, I saw something else. I saw a new world coming rapidly. More scientific, efficient, yes. More cures for the old sicknesses. Very good. But a harsh, cruel world' (267). Not a world that is *here*, but one that is *coming,* one that might in fact depend upon experiments conducted on these too human subjects.

In a novel set in 'England, late 90s', very deliberately not after a future war, with analogue technology, creaky wheelchairs, and fossil fuel vehicles, it requires a leap of faith to suspend disbelief, to imagine that cloning performed to such a precise degree might be possible. The far sadder but more credible truth is that Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth were, as Ruth comes to realise, the children of 'Junkies, prostitutes, winos, tramps' (164). We can infer that the clones are not for specific donors, but they are all unique, some less optimal than others which makes little sense at all. It also makes little sense to use thinking feeling persons when organs themselves might just as easily be grown in those enigmatic 'test tubes'. The novel is about bad faith, deceit, the misuse of language to create a cruel world for some, a miraculous one for others: in other words, we must accept 'the invisible rein' and agree to the rules of a game we know to be fantasy. In this sense, we are to simply surrender uncritically to that which the novel and its subjects present to us as obvious, the myth that clones are real. To read the work as if it were about clones is to assume that at the end Miss Emily and Madame are, finally, being honest, telling the 'truth', in so doing undermining the novel's,

and Ishiguro's subtle play with irresolvable ambiguity. In the context of the work's profound deceptions and misdirections, such assumptions of good faith are dangerous, it is the faith that mitigates the guilt of those involved, the complicity of the public, and the reader. As Kathy says at one point of another Hailsham fantasy instigated by Ruth, 'we each played our part in preserving the fantasy and making it last for as long as possible' (52). We as readers, as critics, as fellow persons often preserve such fantasies if they enable us to continue to behave in ways which other stories might make ethically troubling. The mastery of Ishiguro's novel, which invites intradiegetic questions about the clones' humanity, is that the entire body of real-world scholarship that has arisen around the work capitulates to the myth, takes for granted that they are clones despite the evident lack of any basis for such faith, and asks the same questions: are they sufficiently like us? Do they have souls? Kathy's memoir is indeed part of a gallery exhibition, set before us to assess to what extent she deserves compassion, a deferral.

When Kathy sings so poignantly to her imagined child, pleading 'never let me go', it is not because she would therefore be a clone, but because to be let go is to be alone. Anne Whitehead surmises that for 'Kathy, the song represents the combined happiness and anguish of holding an imagined baby close to her, and it speaks of her unfulfillable "human" desire both to have babies and to have experienced an intimate connection or bond with a mother' (67). We might tell a different story about this moving moment, one in which Kathy is not the ideated parent in the scenario, but the child, and that her plea is that of a child to a mother to not let her go, to not give her up to Hailsham and the brutality that lies ahead. Perhaps then when Madame recalls that day, she conceals a truth which even at story's end is too harsh to reveal: she's seen this very moment before. Kathy had a mother, maybe even a loving one, but unable to cope, sick or poor, and she had let her daughter go. Kathy retains such profound, otherwise inexplicable fondness for this very particular song because it evokes a

distant memory, of being held in her mother's arms for a final time while Judy Bridgewater's recent record played softly in the background. Kathy was likely born in the early 1960s, and the recording she tells us is from 1956 (Suez again), the kind of album that her mother may have had on vinyl. If we look closely, we might even see the faint silhouette of a younger Madame, then around Kathy's current age, tearful in the shadows of a partly ajar door, waiting to take her away to that 'cruel' world. Kathy, unsettled by this moment but accustomed to being 'looked at' with unease by Madame, remarks tellingly that this time there was 'something extra in that look I couldn't fathom' (71). She senses that Madame is recalling a long distant past, a memory that might until this moment have remained in the darkness.

Ishiguro is profoundly interested in failed parenting, as we see in *When We Were Orphans*, *The Unconsoled*, *A Pale View of Hills*, *An Artist of the Floating World*, indeed at the foreground of each of his fictions (how can we forget Stevens sending Miss Kenton to close the eyes of his dead father while he serves brandy and eavesdrops). When searching for their 'models' or 'possibles', they form different hypotheses, 'Some students thought you should be looking for a person twenty to thirty years older than yourself—the sort of age a normal parent would be' (137). Regardless, they ask the same kinds of questions that we might ask of birth parents:

> we all of us, to varying degrees, believed that when you saw the person you were copied from, you'd get some insight into who you were deep down, and maybe too, you'd see something of what your life held in store. There were some who thought it stupid to be concerned about possibles at all. Our models were an irrelevance, a technical necessity for bringing us into the world, nothing more than that. It was up to each of us to make of our lives what we could. (137-138)

There are several dimensions to this passage. On one hand it introduces a depth model – there is something inside, 'deep down', like perhaps a soul or that unique self that Madame's gallery is designed to uncover (the 'heart' of Josie in *Klara*). Clones, we are to believe, have

no depths. On another, it is about parental and personal responsibility, role modelling. Or, we might read this about the aspirational limitations of the working classes, social mobility; are we constrained, it seems to ask, by the lives led by our parents, are they inescapable portents of our futures? Two views here on aspiration for the working classes, one that we are to a degree profoundly limited by our upbringing another that we can escape those fates. Ishiguro's answer is somewhat ambivalent, knowing as we do that most clones do not resist but comply, 'fail to bear witness to their own condition', as Ivan Stacy has suggested (238). Kathy, however, a unique survivor, seems to strive for something more. At the end of the novel, then, while arguably not a clone, she is profoundly alone, on the other side of the symbolic barbed wire that encircles the fictional world.

Indeed, the novel's ambiguous final scene is hinted towards early in the text, when Kathy recalls the power that certain cultured narratives come to have over her and her peers. The tales, unsubtle cautionary parables very much like fairy tales, are used to scare one another but are also very possibly encouraged by the guardians to discourage escape attempts. One gruesome story is about 'a boy had had a big row with his friends and run off beyond the Hailsham boundaries. His body had been found two days later, up in those woods, tied to a tree with the hands and feet chopped off' (50). While this might appear fantastically monstrous like any child's story, it is a peculiarly accurate image of their futures; indeed, Kathy recalls it at a point when Tommy and Ruth have been taken beyond the boundaries of Hailsham and 'chopped' into medically useful pieces. Through this story the children become complicit in reinforcing their own entrapment, very overtly when they frighten Marge K. 'by hauling her out of bed, holding her face against the window pane and ordering her to look up at the woods' (). Given its mythic power over the childhood imaginary it is no wonder that even in adulthood the children do not attempt to flee their fates and run heedless into the unknown horrors of the 'wood'. Another is about an old Hailsham student who had 'climbed

over a fence just to see what it was like outside', as do Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy, but 'when she tried to get back in, she wasn't allowed. She kept hanging around outside the fences, pleading to be let back in, but no one let her. Eventually, she'd gone off somewhere out there, something had happened, and she'd died. But her ghost was always wandering about the woods, gazing over Hailsham, pining to be let back in' (50). That 'something' is the harvesting that at this point lingers like an unformed horror in their imaginary. In the final scenes which mirror this moment, we see Kathy, 'standing before acres of ploughed earth. There was a fence keeping me from stepping into the field, with two lines of barbed wire', she imagines 'standing here in front of it, and if I waited long enough, a tiny figure would appear on the horizon across the field, and gradually get larger until I'd see it was Tommy, and he'd wave, maybe even call' (282). Kathy leaves before the fantasy, or even suicide ideation goes any further, partly to leave us wondering whether she is inside, he outside, whether she hopes he might make it beyond the fence to her, or she join him in death on that side. Clearly Kathy is the girl in the earlier childhood story, now trapped beyond the fence, as spectral as those figures that visit the canal in Ishiguro's gothic debut *A Pale View of Hills*, haunting the countryside now utterly alone but unable to get back into a world of a perfect childhood and hopes for bright futures supported by the now vanished oneiric Hailsham. Ishiguro's ending gestures towards another ghostly story, Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), or more accurately Kate Bush's remarkable interpretation in which her equally jealous Cathy, forever outside, cries to Heathcliff who has a 'temper' like Tommy has Tantrums, 'it's me, I'm Cathy, I've come home, let me in'. We know how important popular music is to Ishiguro who wanted when young to be a singer songwriter, who changed the ending of *Remains of the Day* after listening to Tom Wait's *Ruby's Arms* and who snuck Axl rose into *The Buried Giant.* Perhaps we can imagine our Kathy H. as Cathy Heathcliff, united at last in death.

This is not the only time Kathy and its various incarnations is used in a critique of servitude. In his early Ch4 screenplay, *A Profile of Arthur J Mason* (1986), Ishiguro writes about the eponymous figure, a butler for Sir Henry Reid who sees a book published to rapturous acclaim some 36 years after having written it. In the interim, having lost hope of publishing, been abandoned by his family because of his lack of ambition, and devoting his life to service, Mason (as I have argued elsewhere) has become an attenuated figure who simply cannot admit that he regrets his missed opportunity for literary glory without acknowledging that the life which he has actually led has been wasted.[4] At one point in the screenplay, played with remarkable delicacy by Bernard Hepton, he is asked by the film producer to read a short passage of his novel, written after the war in the promise of a more egalitarian England, seemingly a semi-autobiographical fiction about his and his wife's pre-war vocation:

> When he came to the bridge, he looked back to the house, standing there in the spring sunshine. It looked perfectly unforbidding, almost cosy. A house like that - how could a house like that be the prison Kathrine had spoken of the night before? A house like that, so English and comfortable, could be transformed from prison to haven without a single brick being touched, without the slightest alteration to its windows and doors. One had only to see it from the bridge, caught in the early splendours of spring. (9)

A Profile is very obviously an important early sketch for *Remains,* but it also contains the kernel for *NLMG*. A young woman with a growing awareness that her life will be lived in the service of others' needs, Kathrine looks back to a house whose meaning shifts merely with a changed perspective, a different story. We could ask the same question of Hailsham, how such a house, splendid with grand gardens, important friendships, playing fields and ponds, might be a kind of prison. Kathy's memoir records her dawning awareness that Hailsham,

[4] "Kazuo Ishiguro's TV and Film Scripts", ed. Andrew Bennett, *The Cambridge Companion to Kazuo Ishiguro.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023.

which she recalls still with such fondness, was not a nurturing home away from home, but a penal institution for those condemned to death and whose fate was sealed by their simple unproven designation as clones.

However speculative this re-reading of our clones as humans might appear, it does answer many of the text's implied questions. More, it tells us something, or rather proposes a series of conundrums about, fiction and the novel. I propose that viewing Kathy, Tommy, and Ruth not as metaphors for the poor, or for ageing and mortality, or thought experiments about the importance of souls or our purpose, but viewing them as people like us who have been told, convinced that they are not like us, radically alters the reality of the reading experience while also more profoundly challenging readings of fiction, more so literary fiction, as intricate entelechies of signification and semiosis. What kinds of truths do we leave unquestioned while we scour the text for its hidden meanings? In this case, we look through the most pervasive but subtle, powerful yet camouflaged of the novel's codes. Stacy argues that in the novel, by the clones, 'untellable narratives, those which would transgress tacitly drawn boundaries, and in doing so would articulate and hence bear witness to their role, are replaced with less risky stories' (242). For reader and subject, the myth of cloning is the 'less risky' story, because it creates a kind of necessity, inevitability, forestalling any desire to escape for the clones and mitigating any guilt by their beneficiaries. *NLMG* is a parable, still, for the terrible but also consoling power of narratives, of telling stories. As we have seen, Kathy and her peers are incorrigible story tellers, creating narratives about haunted woods, deferrals, possibles, which become integral parts of their reality. Narratives can make us change the way we think about ourselves, about others, about entire groups of people, and in so doing render them susceptible to various forms of more or less direct exploitation.

Never Let Me Go is ironic, subtle, and paradoxical in its examination of the power that narratives have to form and deform our worlds. The clue is in that enigmatic name, Hailsham, hail a sham, to acclaim that which is not what it is purported to be. It tells us something not about clones, or science, or the posthuman, but rather about the ease with which groups of vulnerable human beings can be cast as and encouraged to view themselves as somehow less than human simply by the proliferation of the stories that are told about them. Ishiguro drafted the novel in the aftermath of the Kosovo War, an event that stayed with him, as is apparent from its mention in almost every interview he gave about his later novel *The Buried Giant*, when he said that 'I didn't want to write a book about Bosnia and Kosovo and nothing else', or to St John Flynn that 'I'm not saying this is basically what happened in Bosnia and Kosovo kind of disguised. I mean it doesn't work like that; you won't be able to find direct correspondences' (Rukeyser np; Flynn np). Very obviously these questions are pertinent to *The Buried Giant*, but they would also have been resonant, even more resonant, during the process of writing *NLMG*, as would the growing dehumanisation and politicisation of refugees drawn from that crisis (refugees are central in *When we were Orphans* and *The White Countess* (2005)). Dominic Dean, in a fascinating article on themes of migration and conspiracy in Ishiguro's works, remarks that '*A Pale View* centres on post-migration trauma following the international crises of the Second World War; and *Orphans*' concerns 'a broader migration crisis' (1119). As Alan Travis wrote in a *Guardian* special report on 'Refugees in Britain' in the 1990s, 'The former Federal Republic of Yugoslavia topped the list of countries from which applicants came, followed by Sri Lanka, China, Somalia and Afghanistan' (2000 np). Dover, very pointedly the location of Ruth's medical centre, is the locus of immigration and processing centres even today. Anthony H. Richmond writes that 'In August l999, a crisis occurred in the port of Dover and in other parts of Kent County where a number of asylum seekers were housed', local 'residents were generally

hostile to the newcomers, and newspapers published stories with strong racist slurs against them' (2000, 39). In 1999 the UK government introduced the Immigration and Asylum act, designed to speed up processing, partly by establishing two-tiered accommodation: short term 'initial' and longer term 'dispersal', not unlike Hailsham and the dilapidated Cottages. It is too reductive to suggest that *NLMG* is *about* refugees, but it does very clearly include them in its purview of marginalised groups degraded by politically convenient narratives, myths of opportunistic swarms of hostile opportunistic foreigners intent on exploiting the west's compassion.

But Ishiguro may have been influenced by another real-world event which occurred during the novel's drafting, the very public Alder Hey hospital scandal. Between 1981-1996 the organs, tissue, and even entire foetuses of children were illegally harvested and stored by a Liverpool Children's hospital and, it was subsequently revealed, NHS trusts across the country. Under the leadership of Professor Dick van Velzen, a cot death specialist, Alder Hey removed organs for research purposes, but, as van Velzen remarked, 'There weren't enough funds. We had one microscope between three of us. So the organs piled up' (Moreton). David Batty wrote that, after parent complaints, Frank Dobson launched an 'inquiry in October 1999 following revelations that three children's hospitals had been harvesting hearts, lungs, brains and other organs from dead babies without their parents' informed consent' (np). Marjorie Miller of the *Los Angeles Times* noted at the time that 'British newspapers revealed that in addition to storing organs from dead patients, Alder Hey had taken live tissue from patients and given it to a French drug company in exchange for cash donations […] Alder Hey admitted that thymus glands, typically removed during heart surgery, had been given to Lyons-based Aventis Pasteur for about $7 a sample for the manufacture of a drug for aplastic anemia'. This led to the Redfern report, published in 2001, and the passing of the Human

Tissue Act in 2004. Might our unwitting donor be Kathy Hey? Ishiguro had started to write *NLMG* prior to *WWWO,* but only settled on the concept of organ harvesting and completed the novel between 1999-2004, a period in which the Alder Hey scandal, the Redfern Report, and the Human Tissue Act would have been prominent global news.

In the final powerful moments of Richard Fleischer's sci-fi classic *Soylent Green* (1973), the aptly named protagonist Thorn (in the side) discovers the truth of the eponymous food they crave so much, sold as 'miracle food of high energy plankton gathered from the oceans of the world' and converted into food by an undisclosed scientific process. He rages to an indifferent, hungry crowd that 'they're making our food out of people! Next they'll be breeding us like cattle for food! Soylent Green is people. Stop them, we've got to stop them before it's too late'. Of course, it already is too late, and no one cares about this unpalatable truth so long as they survive. Why should they believe this new story over that which frees them from guilt? The absurd myth of endless oceanic bounty is accepted as the obvious truth. As Madame says at the awful end of *NLMG*, 'There was no way to reverse the process […] how can you ask such a world to put away that cure, to go back to the dark days? There was no going back' (257). Ishiguro is too subtle, revels in play too much to be so overt as to have Madame cry 'you are people!', but 'it', the 'cloned' organs feeding the medical market, *is* people. We can resolve the many genre discussions that have beset the novel by thinking of it not as science fiction, but Ishiguro's characteristic silence fiction, which exploits just those kinds of things that people don't like to talk about. As Kathy herself asks of the stories about the woods, but also of us, reading a story in which a technologically backwards society has miraculously and inexplicably perfected cloning, 'How could we believe rubbish like that?' (51). Even were the clones revealed to us and themselves to be human, or perhaps animals revealed to be sentient, lab primates capable of profound suffering, marine animals of lifelong

bonds and complex cultures, their usefulness for us offers too great a reward to accept this unpalatable story. We can return here to *Orphans*, as Banks and Morgan drive through the poor districts of Shanghai, surrounded by desperate refugees, Banks comments of his sometime friend that 'For all his being a refugee himself, he appeared to feel no special empathy with his poorer counterparts' (183). We might change refugee for human, 'like ourself', and the sense would remain and be as accurate. In other words, finally, in the face of our own more urgent needs, those of our sick children or dying partners, we could never let them go, so clones, or at least 'clones' they must remain.

Works Cited

Ayala, Francisco J. "Cloning Humans? Biological, Ethical, and Social Considerations." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 112.29 (2015): 8879-8886. Web.

Batty, David. "Alder Hey report on use of children's organs." *The Guardian.* 30 Jan. 2001. Web. 29 Mar. 2024.

Blackburn, David. "Ishiguro's Creative Friendship." *The Spectator* 22 Mar. 2011. Web. 26 Mar. 2024.

Crichton, Michael. *Jurassic Park.* New York: Ballantine, 2015. Print.

Dean, Dominic. "Migration Crisis and Conspiracy in Kazuo Ishiguro." *English Studies*, vol. 103.7 (2022): 1116–1134. Web.

Eaglestone, Robert. *The Broken Voice: Reading Post-Holocaust Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. Print.

Flynn, St John. "The Buried Giant: Interviewing Ishiguro." *A Life with Culture.* 20 May 2020.Web. 13 Mar. 2024.

Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. "Eugenic world building and disability: The strange world of

Kazuo Ishiguro's Never Let Me Go." *Journal of Medical Humanities* 38 (2017): 133-145. Web.

Griffin, Gabriele. "Science and the cultural imaginary: the case of Kazuo Ishiguro's Never Let Me Go." *Textual Practice* 23.4 (2009): 645-663. Web.

Harrison, M. John. “Clone Alone.” *The Guardian.* 26 Feb. 2005. Web. 13 Mar. 2024.

Huxley, Aldous. “A Note on Eugenics.” *Vanity Fair.* Oct. 1927. Web. 26 Mar. 2024.

- *Brave New World.* New York: Harper and Row, 1946. Print.

Ishiguro, Kazuo, *A Profile of Arthur J. Mason.* Channel 4. Unpublished manuscript held in the Harry Ransom Center. 1984. Print.

- *The Gourmet.* Unpublished manuscript held in the Harry Ransom Center. 1986. Print.
- *The Unconsoled.* New York: Vintage, 1995. Print.
- *When we were Orphans*. London: Faber and Faber, 2000. Print.
- *Never Let Me Go.* London: Faber and Faber, 2005. Print.
- ‘Future imperfect’, *The Guardian*, 25 Mar. 2006. Web. 12 Mar. 2024.

Kanyusik, W., “Eugenic Nostalgia: Self-Narration and Internalized Ableism in Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*.” *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*, 14.4 (2020): 437-452. Web.

Miller, Marjorie. “British Stunned by Harvest of Organs at a Children’s Hospital.” *The Los Angeles Times.* 31 Jan. 2001. Web. 28 Mar. 2024.

Moreton, Cole. ‘Why did Professor Dick van Velzen think butchering babies was right?’ *The Independent.* 5 Dec. 1999. Web. 1 Apr. 2024.

Richmond, Anthony H. “Refugees and Asylum Seekers In Britain: U.K. Immigration & Asylum Act, 1999.” *Refuge: Canada’s Journal on Refugees / Refuge: Revue Canadienne Sur Les Réfugiés.* 19.1 (2000): 35–42. Web. 22 Mar. 2024.

Rukeyser, Rebecca. “Kazuo Ishiguro: Mythic Retreat.” *Guernica.* 1 May 2015. Web. 21 Feb. 2024.

Rushdie, Salman. “Rereading Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*.” *The Guardian* 17 Aug. 2012. Web. 26 Mar. 2024.

Shaddox, K., “Generic Considerations in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*.” *Human Rights Quarterly*, 35 (2013): 448-

Stacy, Ivan. "Complicity in Dystopia: Failures of Witnessing in China Miéville's The City and the City and Kazuo Ishiguro's Never Let Me Go." *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas* 13.2 (2015): 225-250. Web.

Suvin, Darko. *The Metamorphosis of Science Fiction: The Poetics and History of a Literary Genre.* New York: Yale University Press, 1979. Print.

Travis, Alan. “Asylum seekers up 55% as backlog grows.” *The Guardian.* 26 Jan. 2000. Web. 13 Mar. 2024.

Vorda, Allan, Kim Herzinger, and Kazuo Ishiguro. "An Interview with Kazuo Ishiguro." *Mississippi Review* 20.1/2 (1991): 131-154. Web.

Whitehead, Anne. “Writing with Care: Kazuo Ishiguro’s ‘Never Let Me Go.’” *Contemporary Literature* 52.1 (2011): 54–83. Web.

Woiak, J. “Designing a brave new world: eugenics, politics, and fiction.” *The Public Historian*, 29.3 (2007): 105-129. Web.

Wood, James (2015) ‘The Uses of Oblivion’, *The New Yorker*. 18 Mar. 2015. Web. 23 Mar. 2024.